

Wo Firi Ha?—An Exploration of the Facets of Belonging

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Abstract: “Wo firi ha?” in the Twi language of the Akan people of Ghana translates to “Are you from here?”—a phrase often uttered with skepticism in an attempt to investigate if one really is who they claim to be. The words might be of Ghanaian origin, but the sentiment is felt both in Ghana and in Canada. This photo essay is a compilation of stories unfolding on both sides of the ocean that highlight the intricacies of continuously redefining citizenship within these contexts. Throughout this paper, we analyze the concept of Blackness as performance, what it means to “help Africa help itself,” the question “where are you *really* from?”—often asked of racialized people—and, finally, our experiences of belonging through rejection. This paper concludes with an intersectional review of the structures and systems that uphold these narratives, including post-colonialism, internalized superiority, and the surveillance of Black bodies.

Keywords: citizenship, Ghana, Blackness, white supremacy, white saviourism, community, settler-colonialism, performative allyship

Introduction

We the authors would like to pay homage to the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Chonnonton peoples who are the first inhabitants of this land that was stolen by Europeans through violent, coercive, and manipulative tactics. This narrative is far too familiar to us as descendants of a once-colonized Ghana. We seek to find belonging on lands that hold deep-seated traumas as a result of these experiences. We recognize our multiplicity of identities as Ghanaians, Canadians, social work professionals, learners, and purveyors of care and control whilst holding marginalized identities. This requires of us to locate our search for belongingness within these historical truths in seeking good relations with Indigenous peoples and the land. We are privileged to live and work here and, for that, we are grateful.

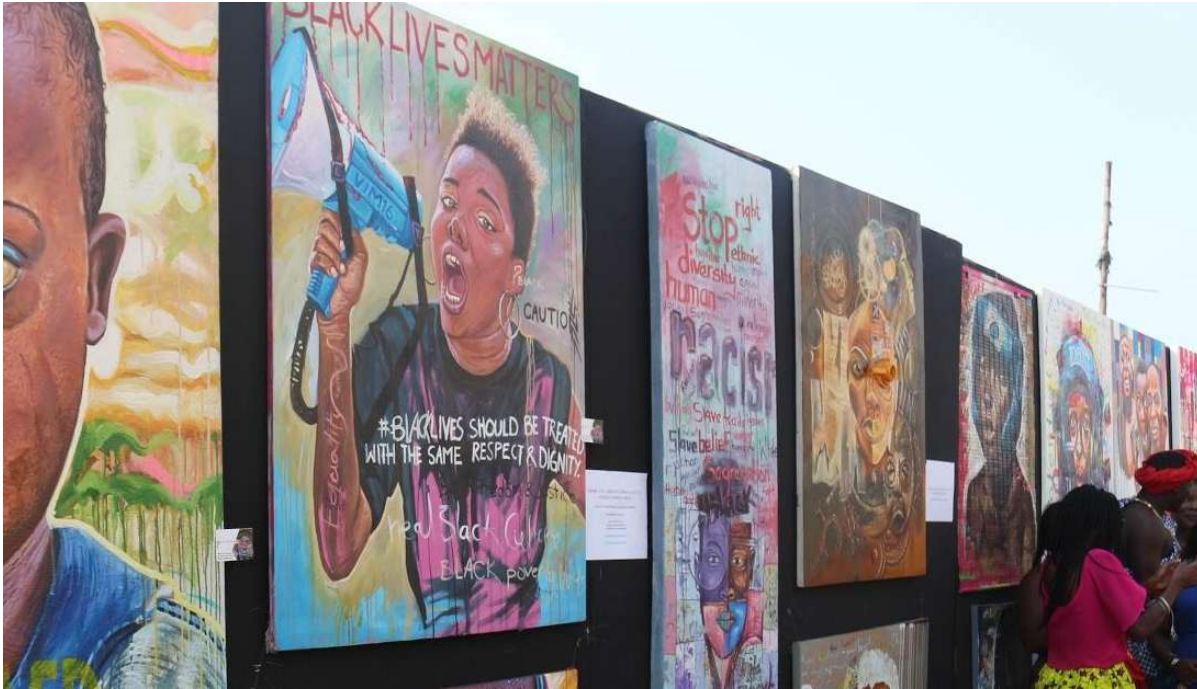
Our ancestors trace their lineage to the Guan and Ewe tribes of Western Africa in what is now known as Ghana. In Accra, Jamestown, and other cities near the seashore, forts line up the coast of the country—remnants of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade that we were taught enslaved many of our local people. The Chale Wote Art Festival, a street and performance art festival, is held annually in Jamestown to reclaim some of the colonial-era forts that have been a source of much harm to the people of Jamestown (Das, 2019). We are inspired by the mission of the Chale Wote festival to push boundaries, display unconventional arts, and use public spaces to obtain “freedom to express, explore, exploit and discover their own limitations and possibilities” (Das, 2019, p. 1). The festival displays murals and performance art that challenge notions of masculinity and explore oppression, belongingness, and community building. As we unravel our own experiences of belonging and citizenship, we use visuals from the 2016 Chale Wote festival and personal photos (all taken by author Scilla’s partner Yaw Owusu-Ansah) to stir up conversations that critically analyze the gaps of this duality. We aim to explore identity and

belonging from the perspectives of a Ghanaian-born settler in Canada and a Black-Canadian settler with Ghanaian indigeneity.

Blackness as Performance

Figure 1

Art Display at the 2016 Chale Wote Art Festival



Note. A woman with a megaphone is featured with phrase “Black Lives Matters.”

At the Chale Wote Festival, this image with the phrase “#BlackLives should be treated with the same respect and dignity” stands out. We reflect on several interactions throughout our lives that reveal quite the opposite, where Black lives are treated as subordinate, considered for entertainment purposes, and viewed like objects on display in a museum. Dignity and respect for Black bodies are far from reach—allow us to elaborate.

Our personal resolve to create contexts for community and connection led us to organize an event in our church celebrating diverse cultures within the congregation. Cheerfully, we gathered our dashikis, found several djembe drums, and combed through our childhood for songs that we fondly remembered singing and dancing to. We felt deep joy for the opportunity to share our food, music, and gifts with our church community.

“That was so exotic!”

“I love all the colours! You have to come perform at my workplace.”

“Can you teach me how to move like that?”

These are just a few of the “well-intended compliments” we received after our “exotic” performance. Comments like these demonstrate how white supremacy covertly functions to objectify and marginalize racialized people. This experience was a poor attempt by white people to create spaces that celebrate diversity as a means of building community and fostering allyship. What truly unfolded was a performative event that otherized and exploited our Blackness. In our attempt to hold spaces of care, Black people are constantly reminded that whiteness is the societal norm, and other identities only exist as the flavour of the day to be licked and disposed of.

“Helping Africa Help Itself”

Figure 2

Cape Coast Castle, 2019



Note. People standing around cannons overlooking the sea at a slave castle in Cape Coast, Ghana.

The lights go dim and a hush falls over the church auditorium. A large projector screen descends over hundreds of people, and suddenly a reel of images begins to flicker. A malnourished child—face sunken, eyes bulging, belly bloated with flies buzzing across her forehead that nobody bothered to swat away before filming—this poor African child. “And for just \$8 a month or \$96 a year, you can feed a child!”

Our bodies cringe in absolute disbelief and rage at the degrading images of so-called helpless African children. The tagline “helping Africa help itself” emerges across the screen. The same people who enslaved our ancestors; incited inhumane, violent division of thousands of ethnic tribes across nations; and raped our Motherland for its rich resources to attain world dominance

... these same people benefitting from post-colonialism and white supremacy suddenly care about helping Africa become prosperous?! Our eyes dart across the room, searching intensely for connection with someone who will understand, anyone who can share in these sentiments of shock and dismay. “Are they seeing what we are seeing? Does this appalling sight make them uncomfortable, too?” We long for an embrace of solace but in a room full of people, it feels like not a soul is present.

In this moment, we interrogate the ways that charity organizations claim to exist in the Global South—that they are a place of refuge, community, unconditional love, and acceptance, and that they treat people with dignity and honour. There is nothing honourable about the depiction of children from the Motherland as underdeveloped, third-world, second-class citizens. However, many organizations unashamedly thrive in sordid charity work that preserves a narrative of an Africa dependent on their saviourism. The “helping Africa help itself” tagline is a case in point that suggests that the continent of Africa is incapable of helping its own people, and that it lives in a perpetual state of poverty and unrest (Baldwin, 2018). We observe this interplay of generosity and dominance, disguised as charity, that sustains structural racism, prejudice, and oppression.

We cannot emphasize enough how the power of language contributes to how we ascribe meaning to citizenship across local and geopolitical borders. Reducing people’s worth to insignificant dollar values is an example of how the use of dangerous and demeaning language can reinforce cyclical dependency between the colonizer and the colonized. The book *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity* discusses how the methods of engaging charitable social work, though profitable, are morally and ethically irresponsible (Maren, 1997). These approaches enable social work and aid organizations to maintain power and control over service users. They are not sustainable and do not empower people in their understanding of their belongingness, capabilities, and contribution (Maren, 1997). We need to be cognizant and actively intentional about changing the ways we speak and cogitate about the African continent.

Where Are You “Really” From?

Figure 3

A Pencil Drawing, 2019



Note. The hand of an artist making a pencil sketch of author Scilla and her partner.

The picture above is a metaphoric representation of the post-colonial experiences of racialized people. It symbolizes the dominant group’s attempt to define and control our identities through microaggressions, in order to maintain white supremacy. The systematic placement of racialized folks in boxes occur in casual, everyday interactions.

“Where are you from?”

“I’m from Canada.”

“No, but where are you *really* from?”

“Oh wow, you speak really good English!”

“Sorry, I can’t pronounce your name. Do you have a shorter version or a nickname?”

These questions that often arise during interactions with Black, Indigenous, and racialized people support the creation of moulds they are expected to exist within. The social work profession requires respectful engagement with diverse populations from a place of cultural humility, yet these subtle everyday interactions contribute to the maintenance of systemic -isms (Nadal et al., 2019). Statements like these otherize our Blackness and situate whiteness as the status quo.

As African and Black women, we consistently experience many variations of these microaggressions. In a video uploaded to YouTube by Fusion Comedy (2016), microaggressions are described as mosquito bites. Some people get bitten more often than others—and sometimes bites can be life-threatening (Fusion Comedy, 2016). From butchering the pronunciation of “foreign” names to questioning our origins, people who inflict microaggressions prioritize their own comfort and reinforce stereotypes. It is not an inquiry into the identities of who racialized people are to build relationship, but it is rather an assessment of their proximity to whiteness.

Jess’ grade 11 guidance counsellor, Ms. W, encouraged her to steer away from university-level math courses believing that she would fail and deemed them “too difficult” for her ability. Microaggressions have macro-level impacts and ultimately impact how people experience belonging in community and understand their relationality to nationhood. Beverly Tatum (as cited in bell hooks, 2003) refers to this as a “syndrome of not belonging noting that the pressures of trying to fit in, conform, or communicate in the ‘acceptable’ form of the majority culture results in an anxiety that literally interferes with one’s natural abilities and modes of expression” (p. 11).

Belonging Through Rejection

Figure 4

Floor Art at the 2016 Chale Wote Art Festival



Note. Chalk art of two Black people holding the Ghanaian flag.

“Wo firi ha?” in the Twi language of the Akan people of Ghana translates to “Are you from here?” It is a phrase often uttered with skepticism that seeks to decipher if one is really whom they claim to be. In its most authentic form, it is a critique: “Is this your land, are these your people?” We have been asked this question on several occasions and will now narrate the nuances of belonging across borders.

Jess

My mother’s deteriorating mental and physical health brought me to the Motherland for the first time at the tender age of eight. A lengthy seventeen years elapsed before I would set foot again on the Gold Coast. This time, I was accompanied by my husband and a solid foundation of my cultural identity. I could not wait to return and learn about my family’s native land, the origins of my Ewe and Fante ancestors; to meet my paternal grandmother for the first time; and to bask in my alluring African heritage.

After embarking on a 22-hour flight, I was greeted with a tropical kiss of heat on my skin. As I took my first steps out of the plane, I was immediately overcome with immense emotions. I welled up with uncontrollable tears, thinking to myself, “I’m home at last.”

Scilla

At the age of sixteen, I moved to Canada to start school. I was excited about the opportunity to live in a new country but a big draw for me was the chance to reinvent myself. As a middle child, I had become accustomed to following my older sister’s footsteps while remaining quiet and unassuming. This was my time to shine! I had been trying out a shortened form of my name since I went to boarding school two years prior. This had come as a surprise to my parents because I was never one to request something, much less a name change. I was determined to rediscover myself in Canada, to understand who I was outside of the confines of religion, culture, and family expectations.

In the years that followed, yearly trips back home to Ghana exposed the diverse ways that I was growing and changing. I dressed differently, cut my hair, and abandoned my lifelong dream of becoming a doctor. I increasingly became aware of my privilege, questioned my upbringing, things I had considered “normal,” and interrogated how they aligned with the values I was building and developing. Each year that I returned to Ghana, I was relieved to be home, but I found that each time I had to become the “quiet, unassuming, gentle middle child Scilla” again.

Jess

I was enthralled to explore the busy night streets of Ghana and experience Osu, my husband’s childhood hometown, through his eyes. We stumbled upon a shop with a variety of items for purchase. The vibrant handmade art pieces stood out to me; I asked “eyɛ sɛn?”—“How much?” To my surprise, the prices were incredibly inflated. As expected in the markets of Accra, we entered into a haggling match, and in the middle of negotiation, the vendor paused to ask, “Wo firi ha?” I responded, “Yes. My parents are from here, and I was born and live in Canada.” His

judgmental eyes scanned my body up and down, as if he were conducting an assessment to determine the true validity of my Ghanaian identity.

What had just happened? As I began processing the complex layers of that shop interaction, my husband explained that if people believe you are a “foreigner,” it is normal for them to inflate the price of products. He cautioned me as we continued exploring the market to say as few words as possible because my accent would give away that I am not from this land. I felt conflicted inside and thought to myself: “Is it not good enough that my family has its roots here? Is that not enough reasoning for my presence here in the Motherland? Am I not Ghanaian enough?”

Scilla

I tried my best to hold on to Twi while in Canada. It comes in handy for communicating embarrassing things aloud to my husband when in a grocery store. Every time I speak Twi, I feel a sense of pride that I have not lost my mother tongue like many young people in the diaspora do. Ghana was still home, and I knew that anytime I visited, I would feel at home just as much as I did here in Canada.

One evening, after a long day in Accra, I chartered a taxi to take me home. Before I got in, I haggled with the driver as was expected and convinced him to take me at a cost cheaper than the going rate. I sat in the car, proud that I was still able to banter in the local language. I was shocked when he looked at me through the mirror while on our way and asked, “Sister, na wo firi ha?” (Sister, but are you from here?) I was immediately upset. Had I not already proved myself? Was the fact that I had confidently bargained the price down, in Twi for that matter, not enough to prove to him that these are my stomping grounds? I mockingly replied, “Of course, where else would I be from?” To which he nodded slightly and responded, “Oh na I dey think sey maybe you bi from Canada or something” (I thought you were from Canada or America). I was stunned—was there a sign on my forehead that indicated where I spent most of the last year of my life? I felt like I had betrayed and exposed myself somehow. Instead, I replied, “Oh daabi oo, me firi ha” (Oh no, no, I am not from Canada, I am from here). In that moment, I chose to be Ghanaian, and only that.

Jess and Scilla

We recount these disheartening experiences in the Motherland and accept them as a part of the process in discovering and assigning meaning to our identities. Our lives have been shaped by the invigorating sounds of djembe drums, the Ankara cloth that our mothers sewed into dresses, and the sweet taste of Red-Red (fried plantain and beans stew) all year round. On the other side of the world, we reminisce about tobogganing down steep hills as the scintillating sun reflects on freshly fallen snow, exploring various cities and hiking through hidden trails.

In both spaces, we dance through rejection as Black social workers in Canada and rejection as westernized Africans in Ghana. Through these attempts to belong, we have learnt to stand

somewhere in the middle—a place that requires constant unfurling of our identities that permit us to simultaneously exist as Ghanaian enough and Canadian enough.

Conclusion

Kennedy-Kish (Bell) et al. (2017) explain that strength—one of the four foundational principles of Indigenous Traditional Practice—is activated through truth-telling. Throughout this paper, we have endeavoured to uncover the complex truths of our racialized identities across local and global contexts. We dove into this exploration inspired by the artists of the Chale Wote Art Festival. Their relentless strength and courage in reclaiming their ancestral lands through transformative practices paved the way for the people of Jamestown to express themselves freely in unconventional ways. Throughout this paper, we interrogated the concept of performative Blackness, emphasized the power of language in charitable work, and addressed the significant impact of microaggressions on the well-being of racialized folks. Lastly, we narrated our experiences of belonging through rejection. Sharing our truth has required critical reflexivity of our identity formation throughout major life experiences. This process unearthed how the surveillance of Black bodies, internalized superiority, and post-colonialism collude to interfere with the authentic processes of citizenship-making and community-building. We end on this note of gratitude for the truths and learnings uncovered that will inform our processes of decolonizing social work practices.

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